DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 481 234 CS 512 419

AUTHOR	Smith, Carl B., Ed.
TITLE	Successful Oral Language and Literacy Techniques. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY	Institute of Education Sciences (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	TBC-03004
PUB DATE	2003-09-00
NOTE	6p.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0028
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St. # 140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698. Web site: http://eric.indiana.edu.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- ERIC Publications (071) -- Reference Materials - Bibliographies (131)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Bibliographies; *Classroom Techniques; Elementary Secondary Education; Language Role; *Literacy; Literature Reviews; *Oral Language; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS	*Conversation; Language Across the Curriculum; *Speaking Writing Relationship

ABSTRACT

Because oral language is so basic, it is the first step to verbal thinking, communicating socially, and understanding literature. It is through speech that children learn how to organize their thinking and focus their ideas. Nurturing children's language is fundamental to molding them into natural and competent readers and writers. This topical bibliography and commentary summarizes and gives an overview of current thinking on techniques for teaching oral language. The bibliography/commentary reviews research on oral language in the classroom, oral language development across the curriculum, language and literacy, composing through conversation, and language development by Dr. Walter Loban. Lists 2 Internet resources and 17 references. (NKA)

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Successful Oral Language and Literacy Techniques

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Introduction

The following summary gives an overview of current thinking on techniques for teaching oral language. Oral language is a very important part of literacy. Children need to talk to practice their knowledge of how our language works. It is through speech that children learn to organize their thinking and focus their ideas. "Oral language develops first and establishes a model for verbal thinking" (Buckley, 1992, p. 623). Because oral language is so basic, it is the first step to verbal thinking, communicating socially, and understanding literature. Nurturing children's language is fundamental to molding them into natural and competent readers and writers.

Oral Language in the Classroom

Teacher researchers use talk as a way to study issues of language and how it relates to literacy. Talk is primarily a social act. In classrooms, children are usually told when they are allowed to talk, what they may talk about, and for how long. There are generally rules about how talk can be used across classroom activities. "From the classroom teacher's perspective, talk has been transformed from something that we needed to control to teach well, to an event that we must now orchestrate for a variety of purposes" (Gallas, et al., 1996, p. 609).

Talk can be explored from many perspectives. It is studied as an instructional device, an assessment tool, a way to mastery of new ideas, and a contact point between social and cultural worlds. A child's way of speaking is affected by many cultural and oral traditions, by experiences in school as well as the opportunity to practice their speech. "Success in school talk is going to be more generally accessible to children from middle class backgrounds for whom the talk in school will be familiar and congruent with their experiences outside of school" (Gallas, et al., 1996, p.610).

Many students can extend their understanding of math, science, and social studies when these classes involve oral communication. Students who are not comfortable with their speaking ability are at a disadvantage. These students then appear to be deficient in science because of their deficiencies in language. "When teachers and children meet to discuss different kinds of texts–literature, pictures, stories, poems, a solution to a math problem–they present multiple, divergent voices that sometimes compete, but are always involved in an ongoing struggle for meaning and growth" (Bakhtin, 1981; 1984 cited in Gallas, et al., 1996, p. 610). A rich oral language environment in the classroom includes and enhances the social, intellectual, and expressive nature of children (Doddington, 2001). This is a good thing because it enriches the entire school experience for students.

Oral Language Development Across the Curriculum

Oral language development begins long before children enter school. It is the most basic form of exploring ideas and gaining knowledge. "Current research literature on critical thinking and cognitive development indicates that the development of language has a close relationship to the development of thinking abilities" (Berry, 1985; Gambell, 1988; as cited in Hong & Aiex, 1995, p. 2). "This is especially true for elementary-level students. Before achieving proficiency in reading and writing...oral language is one of the important means of learning and of acquiring knowledge" (Lemke, 1989; cited in Hong & Aiex, 1995, p. 2).

Oral language is an important part of the learning and thinking process because it provides a foundation for the development of many skills. Children need to continue growing in all of their intellectual skills, and part of this growth involves oral language. "When confronted with new tasks of learning to read and write while being deprived of their major learning tool, children tend to feel depressed and frustrated. Learning begins to loom large, and schooling gradually becomes routine" (Hong & Aiex, 1995, p. 2). Students are going to need communication skills throughout life. Oral language needs to be a skill that continues to grow and be nurtured as a life skill for each student. Every area of the curriculum is enriched through language.

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Language and Literacy

Homes that value literacy tend to create children who are excited about literature. They have an environment filled with print to explore and models to show them that reading is a basic part of everyday life. Language and literacy seem to go hand in hand, being an integral part of each other. Using language throughout the curriculum gives students a chance to work on oral expression and fluency in all subject areas. This allows them to use a skill they are comfortable with in a subject they may not be comfortable with. Language opens doors that may not open otherwise. Poetry is a good example of using language to improve other skills. Poetry read out loud and performed in front of the class gives students a chance to work on writing, reading fluency, verbal expression, and self-esteem.

Children who are struggling with their studies and are self-conscious about getting up in front of a group of any kind begin to relax and enjoy the poetry readings. They become more daring and imaginative speakers as they become accustomed to speaking in front of their peers. Doing something they are proud of and familiar with gives them the security needed to venture into new situations. Children expand their abilities in composition and performance. When children are immersed in their poetry, they begin to explore new ways of using written as well as oral language. "All children need to develop a range of ways with words if they are to have a chance at making their voices heard during their lifetimes" (Bianchi & Cullere, 1996, p. 247).

Many good things are learned through children's literature. It not only gives students the self-esteem they need to perform in front of their peers but also helps them see others in difficult situations and provides a solution to the problems in the story. These may be real situations that the student deals with. Allowing them to see the situation resolved peacefully in a story may help them to use that information in their own lives. "Reading stories to discover how the characters in the books handled situations gave the children a basis for responding to their own situations, and helped them realize that they were not alone in their problems" (German, Tschoepe, & Martinez, 1998, p. 17).

Composing Through Conversation

"Co-authoring provides an incredibly rich challenge that translates into a potent opportunity for learning content, strategies, and conventions, and for developing understandings about a medium and how to use it" (Condon & Clyde, 1996, p. 587). More involved texts and stories result from collaborating with others in the writing process. A student's insight into the composition and subject matter is broadened through interacting with other authors. There are many different kinds of co-authoring relationships identified by Wells & Chang-Wells (1992). The relationships are organized into three sections.

No Conversation

1. Onlooker: "One author is clearly committed to the ideas and structure of the product or the text; the colleague is simply nearby."
2. Secretarial: "One author dictates a text to another who is involved neither in the ideas nor the composition but serves, instead, as a technician or scribe."
3. Ghost Author: "The author share ideas with a composer who shapes them in a viable product. Both are committed to the ideas, although one...is committed more to the ideas and the other to shaping the text into a product."

Partial Conversation

1. Mirror Reader: "The first author, working alone, creates a text and then shares it with the second author, who, without adding anything directly, questions, comments, or makes suggestions into a subsequent draft."
2. Divide and Conquer: "Authors collect their individual, yet related texts on some subject into a single product."
3. Tag Team: "Authors take turns, with each adding to a product."
4. Thought Collective: Several authors come together to discuss a project of mutual interest, with shared ideas emerging. Each author then composes the shared concepts into individual personal product."

Full Conversation

1. Bipartisan Committee: Each of the authors creates a product. The authors then collaborate to collapse their individual products into a single text..."
2. Collaboration in Composition: "Working together from the beginning of their collaboration, the authors create a single product."
3. A Community of Composers: "...the co-authors discuss all aspects of the text. They take turns working on it, each trusting the other to be true to the shared vision of the product." (adapted from Condon & Clyde, 1996, pp. 588-591)

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Each author brings a unique set of insights and experiences into co-authoring. This encourages interesting discussions, creating varied learning opportunities for everyone participating. "Co-authoring experiences provide an opportunity for co-authors to stretch themselves beyond their current understandings as they explore new ideas, purposes, strategies, and conventions in concert with other learners" (Condon & Clyde, 1996, p. 593).

When children choose their own partners, they learn many interesting things about them. Some of the best friends do not make good co-authoring buddies. Many times when students are very good friends socially, they aren't able to stay on the task of authoring. More time is spent talking. Students learn to select partners with whom they can work, not those that use up all their energy in conversations.

When teachers become co-authors with children, it provides a tremendous learning experience for both of them. Teachers make less assertive children feel safe, supported, and successful. Teachers pick up ideas about students' composing strategies, which is useful in planning instruction to better meet the students' needs. "Co-authors who are allowed choice and opportunity to design and develop their own products have a greater sense of ownership of their work" (Concon & Clyde, 1996, p. 594). Although co-authoring students take longer to produce a text, the result is more elaborate and sophisticated than anything each author would have produced all alone. Students spend more time developing each part of the text and make a more creative final story if they are working with other authors. "Additionally, due to the ongoing conversations about all aspects of process and product, it appears that there is increased opportunity for learning while students are engaged in co-authoring" (Condon & Clyde, 1996, p. 595).

Language Development by Dr. Walter Loban

Dr. Loban believes that teachers and their students listen to the equivalent of a book a day; talk the equivalent of a book a week; read the equivalent of a book a month; and write the equivalent of a book a year (Buckley, 1992, p. 623). He is very much an advocate for letting children talk in the classroom. Through their oral language, children establish basic grammar and verbal thinking. "Practical reasons emphasize how derivatives of oral language, notably reading and writing, emerge from this basic grammar regardless of how dominant or complex reading and writing may become in a literate society" (Buckley, 1992, p. 623).

Oral language also enhances the development of higher-level thinking skills. Higher-level thinking requires sequencing of concepts, in both oral and written form. Oral language allows students to talk about their thoughts and arrange them into logical sequences to obtain the knowledge needed for answering higher-level thinking questions.

Poetry and Song

"When teachers and children share their love of literature by reading aloud, classrooms become places where children learn to read and write with a sense of listening to the words on the page" (Lenz, 1992, p. 597). By reading aloud, students find new meaning in the words on the page (Beck & McKeown, 2001). Oral language makes the words come alive and the meaning is much deeper, creating more feeling, emotion, and understanding. Using different tones of voice gave the same reading different meaning. When students are rehearsing a poem to be read aloud, there are many steps to run through in the process of finding exactly the right way to read the words. Children listen to themselves, hear their own voices, and sometimes struggle to find the perfect way to convey the meaning they feel in the poem. If students write their own poems, they sometimes revise the words as they are speaking, finding a better way to say it. Students also begin to find a sense of the audience because they want their speaking to appeal to the particular audience they are addressing.

Reading poetry in the upper grades is similar to singing songs in the kindergarten classroom. Kindergartners develop communication and speaking skills through their music expressions. Song prepares them in reading readiness and other skills necessary for communication. "Children need to experiment with language to establish a repertoire of vocabulary words necessary for communication" (Casiano, 1998, p. 3). Song picture books also enhance the development of literacy. "Song picture books help build familiarity and enjoyment, repetition and predictability, vocabulary development and knowledge of story structure which promotes crucial thinking and problem solving skills (Jalongo & Ribblet, 1997; cited in Casiano, 1998, p. 4). Song and the motion that goes with it also encourage creative expression. Students learn to keep the beat and perform rhythms. Most children enjoy song and music even if they don't understand the language. Music literacy helps develop an appreciation for vocabulary. It improves communication, listening, and critical thinking skills. Song also brings children together and improves their cooperation skills as they learn to take turns and sing together. The familiar repetition of songs helps children predict outcomes of events more easily. Song picture books and singing stories help with vocabulary, articulation, and communication skills. These are life-long skills that need to be developed. "The children have diverse interests, but singing seems to be a common way they enjoy learning" (Casiano, 1998, p. 8).

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Conclusion

Oral language has many qualities for use in the classroom. Children are active learners, and being allowed to act on what comes naturally to them can only enhance their learning environment. Dr. Walter Loban has a clear message concerning the use of oral language in the classroom. "If the skills and art of listening and speaking can be either enriched or deprived, depending upon linguistic experiences, and if the consequences of well developed or inadequate oral language performance affect the quality of children's basic verbal thinking, oral communication, and success or failure in reading and writing—then listening and speaking must be an integral part of the language curriculum, K-12" (Buckley, 1992 p. 625).

Internet Resources

*Literacy and Language Development, from the Northwest Regional Education Laboratory
http://www.nwrel.org/comm/topics/lld.html
A collection of resources focusing on the understanding and development of skill in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. It is the mastery of these cornerstone skills which provides a foundation for both literacy and the habits of mind that lead to lifelong reading and writing.

*Information on Oral Language, from the Reading Rockets
http://www.readingrockets.org/lp.php?CID=6
This site provides valuable ideas and information about how children develop oral language skills through interactions with their caregivers and families. These skills inherent in oral language – listening and talking – are critical foundations upon which reading and literacy skills will later be built.

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ERIC TBC #03004 was published by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English and Communication, 2805 E. 10th St., #140, Bloomington, IN 47408-2698, Tel. 1-800-759-4723. Full text at: http://eric.indiana.edu. ERIC Topical Bibliography and Commentary summaries are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. This project is funded at least in part with Federal funds from the US Department of Education under contract ED-99-CO-0028. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the views of the US Department of Education nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the US Government.

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